Commentary
April 11, 2023

Why Belarus Wants to Host Russian Tactical Weapons

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Originally published by the Observer Research Foundation

Summary

Belarus is willing to host Russia's tactical nukes as NATO considers expanding presence in Eastern Europe.

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On 25 March, in a televised interview, President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia is preparing to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to its neighbouring and allied country Belarus. As the announcement has potential global implications for non-proliferation and strategic stability, as well as for the course of the Ukraine crisis and, more broadly, Russian-Western confrontation, it made immediate headlines around the world. Several governments, primarily in the West, and international organisations quickly issued official statements, mainly deploring the declared plans.

Political and media discussions about Putin's statement have centred on why Moscow might be interested in stationing its tactical nukes in Belarus and what exactly the announcement is meant to achieve. Given Russia's nuclear superpower status, its thinking and intentions in this context obviously matter the most. Yet, the analytical puzzle around the development would be incomplete without Belarus itself and its government's stance. In fact, as early as November 2021, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko warned that he would suggest that Moscow move nuclear weapons to Belarus if the US considered placing its nuclear bombs in Eastern Europe. And in June

2022, he asked President Putin to help upgrade Belarusian aircraft to enable them to carry nuclear payloads as a response to increased military activity on the NATO side, including training flights by nuclear-capable bombers.

Decision set in stone?

Even though leading international media reported the 25 March announcement by Vladimir Putin as breaking news, it hardly came as a surprise. Besides the above-mentioned statements by the Belarusian president, Moscow and Minsk had publicly raised the issue on several previous occasions. For example, at their joint press-conference on 19 December 2022, Lukashenko and Putin confirmed that the countries were working together to prepare Belarusian military aircraft and pilots for possible nuclear missions. A day later, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the allies were reacting to the modernisation of US nuclear capabilities in Europe.

Yet, President Putin's latest remarks did highlight a few new details. Here is what we know at this moment:

- The agreements relate to tactical nuclear weapons only, not strategic ones (the latter were stationed on the Belarusian territory during the Cold War);
- Belarus will have two types of delivery platforms capable of carrying nuclear warheads—*Iskander* missile systems and 10 recently upgraded aircraft;
- Belarusian pilots will complete the training programme in April itself and will then be able to operate the dual-capable aircraft;
- Facilities for storing nuclear weapons in Belarus will be ready by July;
- Russia will not transfer the nukes under Belarus's direct control.

However, no specific information has been provided regarding the actual plans to deploy the weapons on Belarusian territory. Some commentators maintain that Moscow does not intend to complete the actual transfer of the nukes and is only interested in raising the escalation stakes to force the US/NATO to negotiate. Indeed, back in December 2022, when commenting on the Belarusian-Russian plans regarding nuclear cooperation, the spokesperson of the Russian MFA emphasised that no plans existed to move any warheads away from storages in Russia.

> Yet, it is important to keep in mind that we are observing a major military-political confrontation in progress, and as tensions escalate, so do the rivals' countermoves.

Therefore, once the entire infrastructure in Belarus is ready, unless the tensions subside, deploying Russian weapons will likely become the next step.

Mirroring NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements

Both Minsk and Moscow emphasise that their agreement is not a novelty, as they are only about to do what the US and its several European allies have been practising since the early years of the Cold War. This refers to the so-called NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, which "ensure that the benefits, responsibilities and risks of nuclear deterrence are shared across the Alliance". Currently, five non-nuclear European countries participate in the mechanism—Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Türkiye.

Most emphatically, Belarus and Russia stress that they copy NATO's established practice when asked whether their intentions violate the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The NPT bans unequivocally any direct or indirect transfer of nuclear weapons to "any recipient whatsoever". Moscow has long criticised NATO's arrangements but now repeats the same argument that as long as it does not transfer control over the weapons to Minsk in peacetime, no violation of the NPT takes place.

What is noteworthy is that this U-turn in attitude towards nuclear sharing practices seems to reflect Moscow's overall changing foreign policy posture.

> Instead of continuing to criticise what it deemed inappropriate US behaviour, Moscow now claims that if Washington is allowed to do something Russia and other great powers should enjoy the same right.

Belarus: From nuclear-free situational neutrality...

While it still remains uncertain whether Russian nukes will be permanently stationed in Belarus and, if so, when exactly, fully addressing the puzzle requires understanding the thinking in Minsk. Especially given that over just a few years' time, Belarus has covered a long distance from being nuclear-free to asking for Russian nuclear weapons on its territory.

Belarus has been closely allied with Russia since the mid-1990s. The countries have two-tiered mutual defence commitments—one bilateral within the Union State of Belarus and Russia and the other one multilateral as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which also includes Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and

Tajikistan as members. Nonetheless, until early 2022, the Belarusian Constitution had a clause stipulating that Belarus "aims at making its territory a nuclear-free zone, and the state neutral".

While all nuclear weapons that Belarus inherited from the Soviet Union had been withdrawn by late November 1996, Minsk never really tried leaving the mutual defence arrangements with Russia to become a proper neutral state. Yet, when Minsk served as the main venue for peace talks between Ukraine and Russia in 2014-2020, Belarus essentially pursued a policy of "situational neutrality" on that specific conflict and even entertained the idea of becoming an "East European Switzerland".

...to preparing to host Russian nukes

Everything started to change in late 2020 when the European Union and the US reacted to the official results of the presidential elections in Belarus with several packages of sanctions and essentially suspended communication with Minsk. More sanctions followed in the wake of the Ryanair plane incident, the migrant crisis on Belarus-EU borders, and ultimately after the Ukraine conflict began. Currently, the sanctions amount to a partial blockade of Belarus. These sanctions-related developments, the war next door with a high potential for geographical expansion, as well as the massive ongoing militarisation of Eastern Europe and NATO Madrid summit's decisions to expand the Alliance's eastward presence have created a qualitatively different security environment for Belarus.

> It is this context that explains the dramatic shift in Minsk's attitude towards nuclear weapons.

No one in the Belarusian government, according to this author's observations, looks particularly happy about the rapidly deteriorating regional situation and the nuclear weapons developments, as risks associated with becoming a target for NATO's nuclear arsenal appear obvious. However, given how far the geopolitical confrontation has already gone, it is the deterrence side of hosting Russian nukes that appears to prevail in Belarusian decision-makers' thinking.

Especially as they learnt in 2020 about a highly classified war game played by the US National Security Council late in the Obama administration. In that game, a group of US military chiefs decided to fire nuclear weapons at Belarus, which had no role whatsoever in the game, to force Russia to de-escalate in a hypothetical nuclear crisis. While only a

game, media reports about it, against the backdrop of other negative developments, apparently found an attentive audience in Minsk. In February 2022, Belarus adopted a new Constitution, which no longer mentions a nuclear-free status.

Belarus's proactive request for Russia's tactical nukes appears to follow the same logic as displayed within NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, whereby the European nations participating in the scheme consider it as an additional guarantee (besides the collective defence commitment enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty) that the entire military might of the US, including its nuclear capabilities, will come to their defence in case of an attack. For the very same reason, at the height of the Cold War, many European governments wanted to host American soldiers on their soil.

> Similarly, officials in Minsk worry that in case of an attack on Belarus, Moscow might eventually refuse to trigger its "nuclear umbrella" to defend the ally hoping for a quick de-escalation without risking a nuclear strike against its own territory.

Thus, hosting Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus is meant to minimise this uncertainty and, hence, increase deterrence credibility.

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